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True greatness of our Country

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THE TRUE GREATNESS OF OUR COUNTRY

A

DISCOURSE

BEFORE

THE YOUNG CATHOLIC FRIENDS' SOCIETY

AT BALTIMORE,

DECEMBER 22, 1848,

BY WILLIAM H. SEWARD.

WASHINGTON:
J. AND G. S. GIDEON, PRINTERS.
1848.

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DISCOURSE.

PATRIOTISM is allied to philosophy and inseparable from benevolence. A virtuous citizen is not satisfied with knowing that his country is great, and free, and happy; he desires to understand why it is so, what are the elements of its empire, how long they will endure, and what will be their perfect development; because he knows that his country and his race are immortal, and he feels assured that, although mortal himself, he shall not altogether perish.

We have the authority of Lord Bacon to the effect, that "the true greatness of kingdoms and estates, and the means thereof, is an argument fit for great and mighty princes to have in their hands, to the end, that neither by over-measuring their forces they lose themselves in vain enterprises, nor, on the other side, by under-valuing them, they descend to fearful and pusillanimous counsels."

The same profound philosopher remarked, that "the greatness of an estate in bulk and territory doth fall under measure, and the greatness of finances and revenue doth fall under computation. The population may appear by numbers, and the number and greatness of cities and towns by cards and maps. But yet there is not anything among civil affairs more subject to error than the right val-

uation and true judgment concerning the power and forces of an estate." * * * "There are States great in territory and yet not apt to command, and some that bear but a small dimension of stem, and yet apt to be the foundation of great monarchies."

Let us attempt to make such a valuation of "the power and forces" of our country; not merely to "blazon and amplify" a theme pleasing to national pride, but to obtain its necessary and useful instructions.

Comprehensive national greatness requires ample space, in a suitable region, a large population, possessing mental activity and resolution, and a government well adapted to the character and condition of the people, and conducted with wisdom.

Our territory is a belt across the Continent, approaching on either side the limit of the temperate zone. It is not broken into separate and distinct fragments, divided from each other by impassable mountain barriers, by intervening States or Provinces, or by seas subject to hostile intrusion; but it is one whole dominion, continuous, compact, and inseparable. We need scarcely say that its climate is salubrious, and that its land and waters are rich in stores for the supply of human wants in every stage and condition of social life. No where does man find more abundantly than here the rocks of endless variety and the trees of numberless kinds with which he builds and adorns his dwellings, his defences, his temples, his roads, his wharves, and

his ships; the plants and animals which supply him with subsistence and minister to his health, his comfort, and his pride; the minerals from which he forges his implements of peaceful toil and of mortal strife, and the precious metals by which, in the ever-enlarging circle of exchange, he compares the values of all appreciable things.

Long-branching rivers with deep channels, and broad-expanding lakes with spacious bays, all connected or capable of connection, offer necessary and convenient facilities for free intercourse, mutual traffic, and public defence; and these natural bonds, multiplied by artificial ligaments, roads, canals, railroads, and telegraphs, continually extending and fastening upon every part of this comprehensive region, hold it together in union as indissoluble as it was inevitable.

The American Continent, with its adjacent islands —a Continent extending southward beyond the Equatorial line and northward to the Arctic circle— will, at no distant period, have on our Atlantic and Pacific coasts necessary and natural reciprocating markets for the productions of all its various latitudes. The same markets, situated midway between the ancient Continents, and very soon to be connected by direct highways which will supersede a costly and dangerous navigation, will invite equally, and with irresistible attraction on the one side, the commerce of Europe and Africa, and on the other that of the rising insular communities in the

Southern Ocean, as well as the trade of the populous regions of China and the Eastern Indies. An intellectual and active people, holding a position so favorable and possessing resources so boundless, could not fail to secure the freedom of the seas, without which no nation, in modern times, can be great, while they would furnish a political alembic which, receiving the expiring civilization of Asia and the ripening civilization of Western Europe, and commingling them together after their long separation, would disclose the secret of the ultimate regeneration and reunion of human society throughout the world.

Population, not disturbed by arbitrary interference, increases and declines with the abundance and scarceness of subsistence; but abundance and scarceness depend not on the relative fertility of the earth only, but also on the comparative temperance and vigor of the cultivators. The soil of the Eastern and Middle States is less fruitful than that of most of the Western region. Indeed, only the intelligent hands of freemen could have tilled the rugged hill-sides of New England, and drawn forth wealth from its oreless rocks and treacherous seas. The population of the United States, if it should expand on the same ratio to the square mile which is maintained in New England, would be one hundred and twenty-six millions. It may increase above twice that number, and yet be less dense than the population of Italy, or of France, or of

Austria, or of Spain, or of the British Islands. When we consider the certainty of immigration from Asia, in addition to the torrent pouring in from Europe, and the constant flow into the Western States and Territories from our Eastern communities; and when we consider also the permanence of these several sources of increase, we have no room to doubt that it may be estimated for the future on the basis of calculation established by past experience. That basis demands a population of thirty millions in 1860, of fifty millions in 1880, of eighty millions in 1900, and of more than double that number in less than one hundred years.

The Americans are a homogeneous people, and must remain so; because, however widely they expand, they swell in one great and unbroken flood. All exotic elements are rapidly absorbed and completely assimilated. The remnants of the aboriginal and African tribes, being incapable of such assimilation, have hitherto, in different ways, affected and modified the force of the superior and controlling race. Without speculating on the ultimate destiny of either of those unfortunate classes, we may assume that the feeble resistance they offer to the aggrandizement of the Caucasian family is becoming less and less continually, and will finally altogether disappear. Most other Empires were composed, not of one homogeneous people, but of various tribes, races, or nations; discordant in language, religion, habits, and laws; reduced, after long con-

flicts, into more or less perfect combination, but seldom into entire unity. How inconceivably great must have been the waste of mental activity and energy, not to speak of numbers and treasure, resulting from such conflicts. The American people, on the other hand, are practically one family. The Roman people, like the Americans, were liberal in naturalization. Like the Americans, they granted all the rights of citizenship to strangers, and not only to individuals, but to families, to cities, and sometimes to nations. The Romans also planted colonies, as we do, in contiguous territories. Hence it has been well said, in view of those customs of naturalization and colonization, that it seemed as if it was not the Romans that spread upon the world, but it was the world that spread upon the Romans.

But mere numbers, independently of moral elements, do not constitute strength; nor do population and resources combined. When Crœsus ostentatiously showed his treasures to Solon, the Athenian replied, "If any other come that hath better iron than you, he will be master of all this gold." The Spaniard proved this in the Halls of Montezuma, and the Anglo-American has proved it, against the effeminate descendant of the Castilian, in the very scene of his primary extortion.

The American people are free; not merely free, like a nation recently emancipated, but they always were free. Their political independence or nationality does indeed date from 1776; but their political

liberty began with the plantation of the Colonies at Plymouth, at Jamestown, on the Island of Manhattan, on the banks of the Delaware, and on the shores of the Chesapeake. All men know and admit that slavery and oppression debase and demoralize; but it is seldom duly considered that freedom elevates and invigorates in proportion to the extent and duration of its enjoyment. The American people inherit the discipline, the energy, and the resolution of freemen. I dwell on their martial ability, not because they are or ought to be a warlike people, but because courage and fortitude are equally elements of greatness, whether pacific or belligerent, and because no inert or effeminate nation can enjoy peace or security. War, therefore, is occasionally necessary, and sometimes inevitable. In such cases it is "danger to avert a danger, a present inconvenience and suffering to prevent a foreseen future and a worse calamity. These are motives that belong to a being who, in his constitution, is at once adventurous and provident, circumspect and daring; whom his Creator has made of large discourse, looking before and after."*

The Divinity that presides over States "loves courage, but commands counsel." It requires that they should know

> "——How war may, best upheld,
> Move by her two main nerves, iron and gold,
> In all her equipage."

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* Burke

It is, nevertheless, in social and civil life that the mental activity and resolution of our countrymen are fully illustrated. Freedom organizes all the great springs of action in the human system. Seventy years ago we were a nation without capital, without credit, with very indolent agriculture, without manufactures, and with a commerce struggling for life under restrictions which bound this whole Continent and its islands in colonial vassalage to paternal States in Europe. We were without a Navy, and without canals or roads, and were hemmed in between the forest and the ocean by savage tribes. Our schools gave scarcely more than rudimental education, and we were without libraries or literature, and without invention. It is not presumptuous to say that now we possess adequate capital, prosperous agriculture, and rising manufactures; that we have redeemed our country and most of the continent from colonial dependence; that we enjoy a commerce second only to that of Britain, and a Navy equal to any but hers; and that we have canals and railroads spread like net-work over all our populous territory; that the Indian tribes are our stipendiaries; and that we have a system of general education, with universities nobly endowed, charities vigorous and comprehensive, literature aspiring to excellence, and mechanical invention that has brought the world under grateful obligation.

The influence of freedom is manifested in the

moral elevation, social order, and domestic virtues of the people. The religion of the Redeemer of mankind has been left to perform its functions by purifying the motives and refining the affections, free from restraint and corruption by the civil power. Thus we have seen Atheism rebuked and repelled by the reason to which it presumptuously appealed; law sustained without force, and woman restored to her just influence without the licentious aid of chivalry.

Our subject demands not an exposition of our complex system of government, but only a consideration of its influence upon the national progress, and its own probable durability.

The successful establishment of a Republican Government, adapted to an expanded state, is itself a demonstration of national greatness. All history describes indefinite and perpetual aspirations of the wise and the good for the establishment of some durable system, in which the people should exercise sovereignty over themselves without turbulence or imbecility. At a period quite recent the failure of all kindred attempts had induced an acquiescence, almost unbroken, though reluctant, in the belief that mankind were incompetent to self-government, and a consequent reference of all authority exercised over them to the appointment of God. These principles drew after them an universal obligation of implicit obedience to arbitrary and even despotic power—and therefore allowed unlimited and unmit-

igated oppression. At length philosophy sought an escape from a theory so derogatory from the providence of the Creator, and so pernicious to the happiness of men, and attempted to substitute in its place the doctrine that government, whatever might be its form, had been originally founded in a contract between the supreme authority and its subjects, which contract contained mutual obligations, and was dissolved whenever the ruler transgressed the conceded boundary of authority. This theory was unsatisfactory and insufficient, because it was easily shown that the contract assumed was purely imaginary, and of course that the supposed obligations were incapable of being defined. The American Revolution cut, at a blow, the Gordian knot, which science had found it impossible to unloose, and demonstrated to mankind that the only foundation of authority was the consent of the people, who had lawful right to subvert, modify, or change civil institutions at their own pleasure.

It was well understood that the only true object of Government was the happiness of the people, and that "its four pillars were Religion, Justice, Counsel and Treasure;" but the possible establishment of these pillars in a Republican structure still remained to be demonstrated. This was happily done by the institution of a Democracy, based practically on the principles of universal toleration of conscience, and universal suffrage, which is the perfection of political justice, because it is political

equality. This Democracy was made to act with counsel by means of the principle of representation; and the representatives in the various departments of the Government were made more or less independent of popular control according to the danger of passion and prejudice. This system was established in each of the several States, clothed with powers adequate to the maintenance of order, the protection of personal liberty, life, and property, and the conduct of municipal affairs. The same system was distinctly embodied in a precisely similar federal structure comprehending all the States, relying on the ever-renewing action, not of the States, but of the people, and limited in its powers to the management of foreign relations and others important to the general welfare. The institution of a Judiciary in each State, to hold all the representative agencies within their prescribed spheres, and a supreme independent tribunal at the seat of the Federal Government, with appellate jurisdiction, enabling it to decide all conflicts between State and Federal authority, completed this complex and extraordinary structure. Under its shade property has been safe, life secure, and liberty inviolable; social equality has continually increased, and national power has become firm, effective, and immovable. Such are the instructions which our country has given to the world in the philosophy of Government. They are universally received, and they are more precious than any other human knowledge

not derived by immediate illumination from the source of all light.

If, now, after imparting these sublime and beneficent instructions, this people could at once perish from the earth, leaving only their remembrance behind, as of a vision briefly but distinctly seen and then lost forever, it may not be doubted that they would be held in perpetual memory for excellent wisdom and unsurpassed magnanimity.

The institutions we enjoy have a tendency to strengthen their own deep foundation in the elements of national character and popular affection. The anxiety to save these institutions from serious danger or overthrow is the predominating motive of every citizen on every occasion of public action. He holds his own share of sovereignty by the same tenure which limits their existence, and he derives that sovereignty from the equality which they secure. That portion of sovereignty is almost infinitesimal; yet it is appreciated, because it is the safeguard of inestimable rights, a title to consideration, and an Appian-way for ambition.

Honor received begets self-respect; self-respect ambition; ambition animates resolution, quickens mental activity, and discerns the advantages which knowledge and virtue bring to their possessor. Arbitrary power procures the performance of duty only by the terror of penalties. Laws relying on that motive alone will be ineffectual, whether written in the statute book in blood, or engraven in the rock by even an Almighty hand. A Republic employs

emulation; it offers wealth, power, and fame, and it distributes these rewards with impartiality and justice, in exact proportion to the intelligence of the people. Nor does such emulation endanger the public safety by encouraging faction. It is manifest that a Republic could not endure in a society divided into unequal masses by aristocracy. But universal suffrage, exercised with wisdom and moderation, would be the most conservative of all institutions in a country where the dissemination of knowledge and of wealth should be nearly equal.

There is an opinion that our system is unfavorable to great national achievements, which results from the error of regarding the Government as an unbalanced, pure Democracy, veering with every breeze, and in danger of shipwreck from every storm. The United States of America are not a mere city, or a city with suburbs, easily subjected by machinations of intrigue, or corrupted by largesses, or exposed to sudden and overwhelming convulsions; but they are a nation of many States confederated, affiliated, and even assimilated, but yet not absolutely centralized or consolidated. They are individual and distinct political States, possessing elements and attributes of sovereignty transcendant and inviolable. The ruling mass of citizens in each of these States, and of course the governing constituency in the whole nation, are an educated, rural population, possessing property, and dispersed widely, reflecting singly, and acting individually. The day on which the constitution of a State, or

the administration of the Union, is changed by the popular decree, is often the most quiet and tranquil secular day in the whole calendar. The collected will of the majority is not executed without encountering a modifying resistance by minorities. The States least populous, in one stage of legislation, speaks in a voice as potential as that of the greatest. Above all, the division of sovereignty and the subdivision of legislation break the force of popular passion. Affairs merely local are conducted by agents appointed and acting within the proper districts. Matters of more grave moment, relating to the interests of the States, or the rights of citizens, are decided within the States by representatives chosen for that purpose; and only national interests engage the consideration or employ the action of the Federal authorities. Each agent acts subject to checks and supervision, but not to interference by a foreign department, or to central control or popular dictation.

Beyond doubt, an arbitrary prince can execute a given enterprise with greater promptness, energy, and firmness, than a government so complex. Nevertheless, it must depend on accident whether the prince be wise and humane, or weak and wicked. Princes are prone to mistake their own interests or passions for the general welfare. "I am France," said the Bourbon king. There was no one in his councils to deny, no power in the State to chastise, the arrogant presumption. Wisdom needs to hear the voice of truth, and can find it in Republics only.

The battle-fields of Europe, no less than the pyramids of Africa, bear witness to the ambition and the vanity of kings. The monuments of their beneficence are few and far between.

The energies and wealth of any State are easily overtasked, and no exhausted State is fit for enterprise, or can sustain warfare. The energy of one reign which we admire is sure to be followed by a long season of inactivity, perhaps by ages of lethargy.

Whatever may be the deficiency of the Federal Government in capacity for enterprise, it is not the only agency. There are the additional agencies of individuals, of corporations, and of States. If the Federal authorities are slow to undertake achievements, they leave the other agencies free and strong. Congress has never committed, and cannot commit, the great crime of Princes—the consumption of public wealth for many generations. On the contrary, we have seen the phenomenon of a Government free from debt, returning superfluous treasures to the people, from whom they had been unnecessarily gathered.

Citizens thus virtually free from taxation, readily engage in public enterprises, either singly or in association; and the States in the same condition complete works which, while beneficial to themselves, are also important to the nation. All our railroads and canals are avenues of that internal trade and that postal communication, and are means of that national defence, which fall within the subjects of action properly belonging to the Federal Govern

ment. Moreover, that Government contributes to such enterprises, indirectly, by military explorations, by nautical surveys, and by patronage. Thus it happens that more is achieved in this country, in proportion to its capital, than in any other; and more, perhaps, than would be accomplished if the Federal Government should undertake exclusively the responsibilities of improvement. There still remains, moreover, in the people the power, when they will, to oblige even that Government to act directly and efficiently.

The embarrassments of some cities, corporations, and States, incurred in public enterprises, do not affect these conclusions. They, like all human agents, are liable to occasional errors and disappointments; but they can retrieve their errors and renew their resources more easily than subjects or governments in other countries. Our system is to be judged by, not its partial, but its comprehensive results.

The question remains, whether a government so simple in principle, yet so complex in organization, and resting so much on consent, can endure the shocks to which it must be exposed.

It must be conceded that, not only the adaptation of the Government to the condition of the people, but also their capacity to understand and appreciate that adaptation, have been fairly proved by its existence during sixty years—a period which embraces its projection amid doubt and perplexity, its organization and its consolidation in the midst of faction

at home and of insidious and open hostility abroad, and its extension over double its original extent of territory, and over twice the first number of States, and a seven-fold increase of population. During the last fifty years of that period, there has been no armed and organized sedition, and within the last forty years the allegation of treason has been unknown.

The only danger now apprehended is that of a secession of one or more of the States. Since the expansion of the Union, and the increase of the number of its members, it is apparent that even a secession of one or more States would not now, as it might have done formerly, subvert the whole structure. It would still exist, yielding protection and dispensing prosperity to the members which should remain. The certainty of this result could not but exert a great influence, probably a controlling one, against a decision to separate by any discontented State.

Administration cannot always be equally beneficent to all the States, even although it should be always equally just, which is not to be expected. A spirit sufficiently compromising has been always developed on the great question of finance, and the increasing wealth and strength of the various industrious classes of the country are diminishing the importance of that question. In regard to slavery, the only subject which gives rise to apprehension, whatever is vital to any State is guarded against interference by the other States, and even against Fed-

eral interposition. There is not now, and there never has been, in any quarter a disposition to trespass beyond the forbidden limits. Incidental questions have been discussed with heat and acrimony, because liberty of debate was obstructed or denied. Nevertheless they have been decided with various advantages to the conflicting parties, and they have acquiesced. It will be so hereafter, and eminently so, because debate being free it will be seen that Truth is effective when she employs the language of persuasion and of moderation, and that Error owes all her strength to physical resistance.

The question which will arise when any emergency shall come will be, not merely whether there is cause for discontent, but whether it is expedient to secede. He who gives that dangerous counsel will have to show that a miserable local traffic, pent up within the borders of the dissenting State; a timid and hesitating adventure on the seas, exposed to piracy and insult; domestic sedition, mocking and insulting authority that itself is seditious; and perpetual conflict, without naval force or formidable military power, with a great and encompassing nation, are better than an unchecked trade throughout the whole American territory; freedom of the seas under a flag that commands respect; peace, harmony, and social order guaranteed by irresistible power; and a common name and common destiny with the American people. If it were possible that any one State could act a part so infatuated, it is certain that she could draw no other in to share her

self-destruction. Such alarms occur under circumstances less ominous now than heretofore. Assimilation of policy and interest increases; the relative greatness of the States diminishes, while that of the nation is aggrandized; local pride declines, and nationality grows and flourishes. Disunion is no longer a real terror, but is sinking into an antiquated superstition, haunting only minds which morbidly court the enervating spell.

We speak for only the period which lies within the scope of possible forecast. What may happen when cities and States on the Pacific coast shall emulate in wealth and power those now ripening on the Atlantic shores and in the valley of the Mississippi, and when population is expected to crowd upon subsistence, must be left to uncertain conjecture. Nevertheless, with our improved modes of communication, regions may be centralized which once were incapable of combination: the capacity of the earth must be adequate to the support of all her children, when science shall have instructed us fully how to win her utmost kindness, and when her fruits shall be distributed with the equity and justice which republican laws and customs must bring in the passage of years. Even in that far-off period, then, we can discern no cause why the motives of nationality should be weaker than now. But, if a separation shall then be necessary, let us hope that long habits of discipline and mutual affection may enable the American people to add another and final lesson on the excellence of republics—that of

dividing without violence, and reconstructing without the loss of liberty.

Having thus surveyed the elements of our country's greatness, as the philosopher of England performed that duty for his own native land, we may employ his language in announcing the sublime result:

"*Video solem Orientum in Occidente.*** None of the greatest monarchies, which, in the memory of the times, have risen in the habitable world, had so fair seeds and beginnings as hath this our estate and country, whatever the event shall be, which must depend on God's will and providence."

Behold here, then, the philosophy of all our studies on this grateful theme. We see only the rising of the sun of empire—only the fair seeds and beginnings of a great nation. Whether that glowing orb shall attain to a meridian height, or fall suddenly from its glorious sphere—whether those prolific seeds shall mature into autumnal ripeness, or shall perish yielding no harvest—depends on God's will and providence. But God's will and providence operate not by casualty or caprice, but by fixed and revealed laws. If we would secure the greatness set before us, we must find the way which those laws indicate, and keep within it. That way is new and all untried. We departed early—we departed at the beginning—from the beaten track of national ambition. Our lot was cast in an age of revolution—a revolution which was to bring all mankind from a state of servitude to the exercise of self-govern-

ment—from under the tyranny of physical force to the gentle sway of opinion—from under subjection to matter to dominion over nature. It was ours to lead the way, to take up the cross of republicanism and bear it before the nations, to fight its earliest battles, to enjoy its earliest triumphs, to illustrate its purifying and elevating virtues, and by our courage and resolution, our moderation and our magnanimity, to cheer and sustain its future followers through the baptism of blood and the martyrdom of fire. A mission so noble and benevolent demands a generous and self-denying enthusiasm. Our greatness is to be won by beneficence without ambition. We are in danger of losing that holy zeal. We are surrounded by temptations. Our dwellings become palaces, and our villages are transformed, as if by magic, into great cities. Fugitives from famine and oppression and the sword crowd our shores, and proclaim to us that we alone are free and great and happy. Ambition for martial fame, and the lust of conquest, have entered the warm, living, youthful heart of the Republic. Our empire enlarges. The castles of enemies fall before our advancing armies; the gates of cities open to receive them. The continent and its islands seem ready to fall within our grasp, and more than even fabulous wealth opens under our feet. No public virtue can withstand, none ever encountered, such seductions as these. Our own virtue and moderation must be renewed and fortified, under circumstances so new and peculiar.

Where shall we seek the influence adequate to a

task so arduous as this? Shall we invoke the press and the desk? They only reflect the actual condition of the public morals, and cannot change them? Shall we resort to the Executive authority? The time has passed when it could compose and modify the political elements around it. Shall we go to the Senate? Conspiracies, seditions, and corruptions in all free countries have begun there. Where, then, shall we go, to find an agency that can uphold and renovate declining public virtue? Where should we go, but there, where all republican virtue begins and must end; where the Promethean fire is ever to be rekindled, until it shall finally expire; where motives are formed and passions disciplined? To the domestic fireside and humble school, where the American citizen is trained. Instruct him there, that it will not be enough that he can claim for his country Lacædemonian heroism, or even the Italian's boast:

"*Terra potens atque ubere glebæ;*"

But that more than Spartan valor and more than Roman magnificence is required of her. Go, then, ye laborers in a noble cause, gather the young Catholic and the young Protestant alike into the nursery of freedom; and teach them there that, although religion has many and different shrines on which may be made the offering of a "broken spirit," which God will not despise; yet that their country has appointed only one altar and one sacrifice for all her sons, and that ambition and avarice must be slain on that altar, for it is consecrated to HUMANITY.